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**The Cacique in Havana: Visible at the Dawn of the 21st Century**

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26/08/2014



A new consciousness of Cuban reality emerged as the cacique and his daughter stepped out from a 20-year trail and into indigenous and global history.

In Havana, Cuba, early August, Native delegations from Guatemala, Nicaragua, Trinidad, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Chile, gathered at the Cuban intellectual center, Casa de las Americas, for a colloquium to examine the issues of indigenous peoples to be posed to the United Nations.

Formally and openly – officially – don Francisco Ramirez Rojas, el Cacique Panchito, and his daughter, Idalis, also a community leader, represented their people from La Rancheria, one of several dozen Indian communities and family “caserios” (multi-family homesteads) scattered throughout the eastern mountains.

For Cuban history, it was a momentous occasion, as it marked the first time since the Spanish conquest, that an Indian cacique of the Cuban mountains stood before an international gathering, representing an actual Cuban indigenous community, the guajiro-taino gens, of the noted Indios de Yateras.

The visiting indigenous delegates were immediately elated to meet the cacique. An Aymara diplomat from Bolivia, Erwin Mamani, declared, “We were told Cuba had no Indians. So, we are very happy to meet you. Now we know it is not true.”

The Guatemalan ambassador to Cuba, His Excellency Juan Leon de Alvarado, a co-sponsor of the high-level indigenous event, formally greeted the Cuban cacique. “You are now and forever part of this history. As indigenous people, we greet you; we are so very happy to finally meet the Cuban Indian leadership.” The ambassador is Maya-Quiché. He formally greeted Cacique Panchito in his language.

The indigenous women leadership at the event, particularly Marta Sanchez, Amuzga people, from Mexico, and Ruth Buendia, Asháninka from Peru, quickly embraced Idalis Ramirez. Idalis expressed her mountain Indio culture

strongly, and was resolute in the survival to the present and future-orientation of her Indian generations in Cuba. "Here we are, deeply planted (plantaos). Here we are going to stay."

From the onset, when Panchito thanked the president of Casa de las Americas, signal Cuban poet, Roberto Fernandez Retamar, and welcomed the "Indian people, like us, from other countries," the cacique was well ensconced as spiritual host of the event. Fernandez Retamar and the intellectual core at "Casa", steeped in Cuba's half century of revolutionary tradition, gave the Cuban Indian community leaders generous respect. Centuries of denial and invisibility lifted as fog to reveal the smiling and sincere faces from La Rancheria.

In 1995, the cacique had told us: "We want to let ourselves be known." He also said: "We want to meet the other Indian people, see if they are like us." Alejandro Hartmann and I had arrived, after years of intent, at their community base of La Rancheria. Thus began a twenty-year journey, adventures of joy and sorrow, danger and reward, and always on the trail of self-discovery and self-revelation that the cacique had signaled. Some day the full story of that journey will be told. For now suffices this point of emergence, the beloved cacique at the core of hemispheric indigenous representation, and also of Cuban intellectuality, with the message and aspiration of the Taino ancestors.

The Cuban Indian emergence, as invited by the colloquium organizers, notably indigenous studies program director, Jaime Gomez Triana, was granted generous and central space. Our twenty years of orality research and documentation with the cacique and with other elders and leaders of the Cuban Indian community, was allotted a full two hours for presentation and discussion. The hall was crowded with many standing as Panchito and Idalis intoned their songs and appreciations and delivered their messages. Panchito, as always, spoke of the Madre Tierra.

"I plant," he said. "I am campesino. I am obliged to hurt our mother, to cut her, to burn on her. How do I repay you, how do we, the human beings, repay our mother, who is so generous and who loves us so?"

As Gomez Triana pointed out, indigenous peoples as the UN are directly aligning their own rights with the "construction of alternative paradigms for the protection of the Mother Earth."

Panchito and Idalis' traditional knowledge, of herbal medicines, the properties of trees and the many intricate cropping practices of the ancient Cuban Taino tubers, most notably the yucca, or manioc, is apparent. A sense of respect and audience appreciation for their particular orality is not long in surfacing. This is most important as it belies the notion espoused by some that while the Rancheria folks may have "some biological inheritance," they must not have any "cultural" legacy that marks their own indigeneity.

In our dual presentation, Hartmann and I got the chance to review the deep history of Cuban indigeneity. From the very indigenous Taino name of Cuba, survivor of persistent Spanish intents to rename the island, to the recent genetic studies showing quite high (33 percent) Native American Mitochondrial DNA for the Cuban population, to the substantial Taino homesteading knowledge that transfers into and molds our foundational culture, the invisible thread becomes palpable. This orality mounts and deepens in reviewing the documentation on Panchito's people, whose extensive numbers, their sustaining of an office of cacique, and, in particular, their extensive repertoire of community music and dance and their central Ceremony of Macuyo, the ritual prayer of the tobacco, reveal rich cultural matria.

As the week progressed, other Cuban personalities, academics and diplomats of note, passed through the sessions of the colloquium. There was a diplomatic corps reception by the Bolivian embassy, at the plush Hotel Nacional. Cacique Panchito, modest and circumspect, was particularly sought out, including a heartfelt conversation with Bolivian Ambassador, Mr Palmiro León Soria Saucedo, and with the circle of indigenous delegates.

As always in these adventures, with Panchito on travel mode, many telling episodes, spiritual teachings, great exchanges among peoples – too much for this short space. The prize was his presence, at nearly eighty years, still vibrant and to the point, representing a reality – a way of being and a way to be -- that will not die.

One day, there was an honoring for the Cuban international jurist, Miguel Alfonso Martinez. The panel included the former Cuban minister of foreign affairs, Ricardo Alarcon and other Cuban diplomats and hemispheric indigenous delegates. In the 1990s, Miguel Alfonso conducted a major study of American Indian treaties, a praiseworthy contribution, among others, to the United Nations advocacy by indigenous peoples.

A young Cuban diplomat at the panel, readying for United Nations duty, commented on consistent Cuban support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. His clear analysis was well received. But when in passing, he mentioned that Cuban Indians had nearly disappeared, even though there are “some Cuban Indian descendents,” [in the eastern mountains], and that, “here the genocide was overwhelming ...” implying a finality ... the awkward moment was punctured neatly by Jaime Gomez. Aquí estan, he told the Cuban diplomat “Here they are.”

But Panchito and Idalis were already on their feet, with their hands up, “Aquí estamos,” Idalis repeated.

Surprised by their presence, yet after the panel, the young Cuban diplomat appeared more than pleased to meet Panchito in person. A circle formed around the two, and both men requested a photograph. Others joined. Recognition is a process; the revitalization of a whole people is an even longer process.

Later there would be a ceremony, in a cave at Mayabeque – all the Native delegates; the Cuban personnel; local healers and authorities. It is an ancient cave, inhabited by many bats, a ray of sunlight coming through the rock. All together, in a circle of consciousness, the fire delivered and Panchito called the spirits of the place, the smoke of copal and tobacco blending to signal to the sky the message of Indian survival.

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